

'Waiting for "Superman" ': A simplistic view of education reform?

In the eyes of some education observers, 'Waiting for "Superman" ' oversimplifies the problems facing US students and implies an education reform silver bullet for struggling public schools.

By [Stacy Teicher Khadaroo](#), *Staff writer* / September 24, 2010

"Waiting for 'Superman,' " opening Friday in [New York](#) and [Los Angeles](#), has generated buzz for months in education circles. Everyone from [Oprah Winfrey](#) to [Bill Gates](#) is celebrating the documentary, which tells the emotional stories of five students who have entered lotteries to get into successful public charter schools.

The film also offers a broad-brush indictment of [America's](#) school system and teachers unions, prompting praise from reform advocates.

Yet in the eyes of some education observers, the movie oversimplifies the problems facing US students and implies a silver-bullet fix for struggling public schools.

"It gives the reform community something to rally around ... but I do worry that ... it makes [the issues] more about sentiment than about understanding," says [Frederick Hess](#), director of education policy studies at the [American Enterprise Institute](#) in Washington. "I don't just want people to like [charters](#) or support [merit pay](#). I want them to understand what problems we're trying to solve and how we can do charter schooling or merit pay in smart ways."

The documentary's title comes from a story told by [Geoffrey Canada](#), who founded the [Harlem Children's Zone](#) to offer cradle-to-college services and charter schools to some of New York's most disadvantaged kids. When his mother told him as a kid that his beloved Superman hero wasn't real, he was devastated to think that no one was strong enough to save him and his friends from their [Bronx](#) ghetto.

The suggestion is that the five children the film follows – four of them poor and African-American or Hispanic – need to be saved from their dismal schools.

[Director Davis Guggenheim](#), best known for the environmental documentary "An Inconvenient Truth" featuring [Al Gore](#), criticizes himself at the start of the film for driving by the local public schools to drop off his children at private school.

He and producer [Lesley Chilcott](#) hope to impel people in comfortable circumstances to stop writing off the struggles of children in chronically failing schools and become advocates for change.

"Once you witness these lotteries and start thinking of them as your kids," Ms. Chilcott says, "you're like, I cannot rest until I do something about this."

The [movie's website](#) features discussion forums and action steps. People who pledge to see the film receive a code worth \$15 to give to any school project on [DonorsChoose.org](#).

Some bigger bucks went out to schools on Monday when Ms. Winfrey featured the film on her show and announced \$1 million grants for each of six charter schools or networks. Her focus on the film continues Friday in a show from [Chicago](#), which also will feature the announcement of a \$100 million gift from [Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg](#) to improve achievement in [Newark, N.J.](#), schools.

But many observers criticize the film's focus on charter schools – public schools that are granted autonomy from many district policies.

“It oversells charter schools,” says [Jeffrey Henig](#), a professor at [Columbia University's Teachers College](#) in New York. The film notes that only 1 in 5 charter schools are highly successful. But “it implies there's some philosophy that unifies charters and we just need to replicate that,” Professor Henig says.

Another common criticism is that it paints a black-and-white picture of reformers such as [Washington, D.C.](#), schools chancellor [Michelle Rhee](#) (hero) and [American Federation of Teachers \(AFT\)](#) president [Randi Weingarten](#) (villain).

“The AFT ... has been pretty pragmatic in adopting a lot of positions the reformers want,” Mr. Henig says. “Weingarten stuck her neck out on those a bit, and the movie just disregarded that entirely.”

The nonprofit educational publisher Rethinking Schools launched an [online forum](#) to give voice to people pushing back against the message of the film. “By siding with a corporate reform agenda of teacher bashing, union busting, test-based ‘accountability’ and highly selective, privatized charters, the film pours gasoline on the public education bonfire started by [No Child Left Behind](#) and [Race to the Top](#),” writes editorial board member Stan Karp.

“We're not saying, ‘Start charters, get rid of unions,’ ” Chilcott says in response to the criticisms. “What [charters] do most differently is the quality of their teachers, and that can be done on mass level” through better training and evaluation, she says.